

By Radha Rajadhyaksha

MUMBAI: Guru Dutt, pensive eyes gazing out of a black-and-white poster of *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, seems to regard with some distaste a pancaked and lipsticked Jeetendra in a garish poster of *Caravan*. Elsewhere, a sixties' icon strikes a characteristic pose in the lobby card of a workaday potboiler, while a tattered song booklet reveals the forgotten lyrics of a forgotten ballad.

These apparently random nuggets, strewn among a thousand others on the floor of a Nariman Point office, will soon coalesce into an ensemble that aims to bring alive the all-but-obliterated past of Indian cinema. "It's something that was crying out to be done," says Neville Tuli, the moving force behind the proposed cinema archive which will open to the Mumbai public sometime in March.

Though Tuli—former economics professor from London, modern art enthusiast and founder of

KAAGAZ KE PHOOL

the art auction house Osian's—is quick to assert that the archive is not merely an archive but part of a larger Weltanschauung or world view (more on that later), he is not averse to talking about the nitty-gritty along with the macro. "I was always seeped in cinema, its philosophy, its aesthetics," he says, "and one of the problems I perceived—apart from the lopsided representation of film history where only a handful have been given a claim and thousands have died unsung—was that in India, people have a huge pre-conception about cinema. They believe they understand it. But it's not so simple—we need to re-examine cinema, how it influenced our values, for instance, or how it helped build certain systems and institutional mechanisms. We need to infuse a new intellectual energy into the subject—and archiving is

From *Kalia Mardan* to *K3G*, an archive of memories is set to unspool

Art auction house Osian's will open the country's first comprehensive cinema museum in March pivotal to that."

As part of kick-starting this re-examination, Tuli is initially concentrating on the visual paper-based aspect of cinema, though music, film prints and oral history are also on his anvil. "My first priority is the visual, the art-related, so that I have some cohesion with modern art," he says. "The links between cinema and modern art are phenomenal. Phalke, for instance, was a student of Raja Ravi Varma, Prabhat was inspired by Baburao Painter, and New Theatres was brought up on the literary and visual works of the Tagores. Now once you establish

these relationships, each discipline

takes on a new possibility—modern art acquires a wider reach and cinema takes on a more refined feel. And once this kind of research is gone into deeper, the potential for re-examining subjects emerges."

Given the supreme Indian indifference to documentation and preservation, however, Tuli and his team of researchers faced a staggeringly uphill task when it came to the actual work. "In the cinema world, virtually no one respected the paper-based aspects of cinema, whether it was posters, synopsis booklets, lobby cards, show cards or photographic stills," he says. "Most such stuff was treated like *raddi* and thrown away. Some production houses did keep some of their own work—like R.K. Studios, which had the space—but here again it's in pretty bad shape because it's just been dumped as



AAYEGA AANEWALA: An original hand-painted poster of *Mahal*, Kamal Amrohi's 1949 film starring Ashok Kumar and Madhubala. Osian's tracked down collectors across the country for such memorabilia

in a warehouse, not really preserved. Again, a production house like Navketan has nothing

more than a few posters—in fact, we've offered Dev Anand all our material for a book he's planning

on Navketan."

The memorabilia, then, came not from film folk so much as individual collectors scattered along the length and breadth of the country. "There are ordinary people who have collected and preserved, not for any potential investment value but for the sheer love of it," says Tuli. "Some of these are fairly well known—Husaini Bookletwala, for example, who for over 40 years religiously amassed posters, photographs and song booklets and, disregarding all space constraints, stored them in his one-room apartment in Mumbai. Then there are niche small-town collectors—one had everything on Dilip Kumar, another had all the posters of V. Shantaram films, and yet another had collected all the covers of Baburao Patel's *filmindia*." A lot of such collectors, Tuli reveals, are now being offered money by investment-savvy media groups "but they still chose to sell to us at half the price, simply because for them it's not money but love of cinema and a desire to see it conserved that's important".

The results of the great paper chase have been heartening: Osian's has in its possession approximately 85 per cent of all the song booklets ever produced, and over 60 per cent of posters and film stills, the latter including lobby cards (photographic stills of a film displayed inside the lobby of a theatre) and show cards (usually a collage on display in the main show window at the entrance). All this has cost Tuli a bomb—"I've spent one crore only on preservation bills

and that's one-tenth of the costs ahead"—but he's clear that he will not recover the costs from visitors to the museum. For that, there's an imminent auction of all the film memorabilia that's left over after two copies of every item have been stored, and there are the painting auctions as well. "I believe in cross-subsidisation," he states.

And that's where the larger picture, the Weltanschauung, also comes in: his vision for the economic development of India in which creativity will be at the heart. "If the arts have to play a fundamental role in the development of the country, the intelligentsia must stop expecting government and philanthropic patronage, it must stop expecting outside bodies to build its institutions for it," he says. "And if the arts have to generate their own funds without compromising their integrity, then you have to find certain mechanisms or vehicles which make that possible. Therefore the auction house—it becomes the generator of wealth which is systematically ploughed back into building infrastructure."

Tuli rails against the characteristic Indian hypocrisy which frowns upon a marriage of creativity and wealth. "We have to change this attitude," he says. "Earning wealth and being a great institution is not contradictory. Harvard is not only a great university, it is also one of the richest institutions in the world. The intelligentsia must learn to generate and redistribute wealth—so that one day creativity will be in a position to discipline economics. That's the larger battle that has to be taken on."

To the average Indian that might seem a trifle esoteric but he's as happy to gaze at a divinely beautiful Madhubala or catch that elusive Sahir Ludhianvi lyric he's been seeking for years. Either way, Tuli wins his battle.